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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAGHDAD 000020

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SUBJECT: KISSING THE KORAN: ELECTIONEERING IN SADR CITY

Classified By: (U) Classified by Deputy Political Counselor John G. Fox, reasons 1.4 (b/d).

11. (U) SUMMARY: Leaders and residents of Baghdad's Sadr City have pointed to active campaigning in the run up to January 30, 2009, provincial elections. Streets near JSS Sadr City contain hundreds of posters showing Shia politicians. PM Maliki's visage is nearly universally emblazoned with messages of (Obama-like) "change" and "construction." Interestingly, ex-interim PM Ayad Allawi also has a campaign presence in Baghdad's poorest, sprawling district. Supporters of the Iraqi politician perhaps most associated in the past with a secular message have plastered posters on T-wall concrete barriers featuring Allawi literally kissing the Koran. Sadr City contacts note that Iraq's shift since the U.S. invasion toward more overtly religious politics likely necessitated Allawi's new presentation, at least in his public image and attempt to win votes for his list. The most popular candidates appear to come from Maliki's Dawa party, although divides have appeared within the once-solid Shia voting block. Elections and referenda without more job creation and economic improvements appear to mean little to most Iraqis. END SUMMARY.

SHIA FOR SHIA; SUNNIS ABSENT

12. (U) The portion of Sadr City adjacent to JSS Sadr City contains numerous election-related posters. Poloff joined a coalition foot patrol January 1 that allowed for numerous conversations with "average Alis" in the Jamilla market section of the city. (Note: Coalition Forces are present in approximately 20 percent of Sadr City, on the "U.S. side" of a wall erected following a summer 2008 cease-fire by JAM militia fighters. End note). PM Maliki posters outnumbered others by ten to one. Nowhere were the messages of non-Shia candidates visible. One businessman argued that Maliki had growing support because "he fought Al Qaeda in Fallujah and Ramadi, and then JAM in Basra and Sadr City." A day laborer, in contrast, offered sweeping anti-government sentiment echoed by several others standing nearby: "the corrupt government has not done enough for the people." All the laborers were from Sadr City's northernmost sectors (well beyond the U.S.-patrolled southern zone).

13. (SBU) COMMENT: While it is understandable that Shia politicians' posters would dominate Sadr City streets, it is striking that not a single non-Shia campaign message could be seen during a three-hour walk along the area's major streets. Residents say they do not want to vote along sectarian lines, but the campaigning, so far, runs counter to that desire. END COMMENT.

"PARTIES ARE DESTROYING US"

14. (C) A Sadr City district council (DAC) member criticized the proliferation of parties in Iraq. He said that most residents were not yet able to think politically, let alone assess the pros and cons of candidates. He considers parties in Iraq to be a problem for long-term stability, remarking "the parties are destroying us." The DAC member charged that jobs at various ministries were awarded based on party loyalty. Iraqis also increasingly questioned how fair the upcoming election would be, given reports of overt Iranian involvement. The DAC member referred to media coverage of truckloads of fake ballots intercepted in the 2005 elections at the Iraq-Iran border. In his view, party interests had long since overtaken those of the nation.

JOBS, JOBS, JOBS

15. (U) Along Sadr City's Jamilla Market streets (the capital's whole-sale product breadbasket, where five-meter high piles of potato chips and soda bottles dominate the cramped and loud urban landscape), numerous young day laborers voiced distinct disinterest in the national political process. One 20-something (surrounded by a dozen of his friends) told Poloff that everything in Iraq still centered on "jobs, jobs, jobs." Without economic improvements, it did not matter who was in charge (his friends nodded in agreement). Jobs equaled security. A local electrical shop owner -- and self-stated fan of Hollywood action movies -- echoed this sentiment. He added that instead of disrespectfully throwing shoes at President Bush, the now-famous reporter (a native son of Sadr City) should have "just asked President Bush tough questions to embarrass him, such as why U.S. investments had not led to more job creation but only more corruption." The shopkeeper said that he had been personally moved after watching the recent U.S. presidential election results showing "so many crying, but happy and excited" Americans on television.

16. (U) When several out-of-work youth approached Poloff and a group of U.S. soldiers near the district council building to complain about being unemployed (among other things), one soldier told the Iraqis that his own American father, in the "motor city" of Detroit, was jobless; he added that the American economy faced serious economic problems of its own.

COMMENT

17. (C) While only Shia politicians appear comfortable enough to press their message in Sadr City, some residents, and the district chairman himself, argue that Iraqis in this election will vote for the right leader, regardless of party affiliation or religious sect. If so, it will be because economics trumps sect. At a neighborhood soccer match, Sadr City residents offered blunt comments primarily tied to personal economic issues, not political ones. One local mechanic, who ironically had just repaired a bus in the Sunni-dominated city of Fallujah, told Poloff that most Iraqis still awoke each day worried about their kids' safety and finding or keeping their own jobs; to become openly political, he added, remained too dangerous in Iraq.

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